POLICYbrief

Violent Extremism and the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda: Recommendations for the Trump Administration

Roughly 120 countries felt the effects of violent religious and ideological extremism in 2015. Much of the world's concern has been directed at extremist groups influenced by Wahhabi and Salafi sects of Islam, which have spread extensively across the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and parts of Europe. But other forms of religious and ethno-nationalist extremism are also on the rise.

Regardless of its source, this extremism shares a common thread: The ideology held by violent extremists, the reasons people join extremist groups, and the targets of their assaults are deeply gendered. If policymakers design strategies to curtail violent extremism without taking gender into account, they will fail and may even make conditions worse.

The United States and its allies increasingly recognize that military force alone is insufficient in combating violent extremism and have recognized the critical role to be played by women and women's organizations. In February 2015, the White House Summit to Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) underscored the importance of involving women in all aspects of CVE work and of analyzing extremism from a gendered perspective. The European Regional Summit on CVE in June 2015 further concluded that it was essential to recognize the crucial work of women-led organizations and ensure their effective inclusion and networking in efforts to prevent and counter extremism. With US leadership, the UN Security Council in October 2015 adopted Resolution 2242, which linked the women, peace, and security (WPS) agenda and the emerging prevention/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) agenda.

In 2016, the U.S. government incorporated the fight against violent extremism in its National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security. It called for the integration of a gender perspective in the analysis of violent extremism, diplomatic and development support for activities addressing gender-related drivers of violent extremism and radicalization, and support for women's coalitions working to prevent and mitigate violent extremism. Lastly, the U.S. government called for gender-specific deradicalization programs. The U.S. Senate included $20 million for support of women and girls affected by violent extremism in its 2016 appropriations bill.

This policy brief provides a concise overview of how and why a gendered analysis is critical to furthering understanding of violent extremism. It also recommends ways in which the Trump administration can design and implement more effective policies and programs for prevention and response.

I. Women in Extremist Ideology

Extremist groups, particularly religious and ethno-nationalist ones, commonly espouse the marginalization or oppression of minorities and inequality between men and women. These extremely patriarchal groups cast men in superior, "protective" roles, which may condone or encourage violence, and women in subservient ones that mark them as models of a moral and just society. Women's rights are perceived as "Western immorality" and feminism as an extension of colonialist politics.

Extremist groups often create legal and physical boundaries between women and men to keep them segregated, including by curtailing women's access to public spaces. These groups promulgate rigid understandings of religious texts that define what it means to be a good wife, daughter, or woman. Similarly, the rights and responsibilities of men are clearly articulated, and there is often a clear implication that women are under the protection (and by extension, ownership) of men.

Groups such as Daesh co-opt women by promising them a role in creating a new society. They allude to women's empowerment in their ideology, casting them as contributors to their cause, a means through which women can express their female Muslim identity, as mothers and wives helping to consolidate the caliphate, or as physical and spiritual defenders of the caliphate. However, this discourse is often a ruse to mask the reality of women's subservience.

In Pakistan, the subservience of women and more extremist ideologies of religion are also spread through all-female madrasahs. The curricula are designed by men with three key goals: to educate girls to be ideal mothers, train them to perform domestic chores, and ensure women preserve and transmit conservative Islamic traditions and beliefs to their offspring.

II. Motivations for Joining

The majority of fighters and adherents to extremist groups are young men recruited and groomed by older men. Many men who join and support these movements have borne the brunt of decades of state corruption, poor governance, repressive regimes, and poor development policies. Although they come from different socioeconomic classes, they have witnessed or experienced rising inequality and the absence of opportunity to live dignified lives. Young men face difficulty in fulfilling their own gendered roles, such as being good providers and husbands. They may lack the skills or education needed to compete in a competitive and often service-oriented work place. Others may be well educated but lack opportunity due to elite control of positions and resources. Increasingly, young men also see themselves as being in competition with often better educated women for scarce jobs.

However, in recent years, an increasing number of women are also joining. Extremist groups offer men and women a sense of belonging and a cause to which they can devote their energies. These groups also promise retribution for those who may have experienced violence at the hands of the state or foreign powers.

That women are attracted to ideological armed movements is nothing new. But in the case of Daesh, for example, many women—especially the younger second-generation minorities from Europe—are promised status and a role in furthering a cause. They are often co-opted and coerced using online sexual grooming techniques alongside messages of empowerment and respect. Older women often become

affiliated by virtue of the economic and security benefits that their sons or husbands accrue. In Nigerian communities affected by Boko Haram, improved income and livelihoods were an early attraction to join. In Pakistan, a self-proclaimed sheikh used the radio to cultivate a following, particularly among mothers. For many, the extremist groups are the first to voice concern about issues that affect women most, from local injustices to personal health concerns.

III. Women as Targets and Pawns

In many places, extremist groups target women human rights defenders or other civil rights actors because they challenge and question extremist ideologies and espouse an alternative vision and set of values that are typically more inclusive and rooted in equal rights and pluralism. The Arab revolutions revealed the depth and breadth of extremist aims. Although women were prominent as protesters and activists in the Arab uprisings, the political transitions that followed ushered in highly organized campaigns that were intolerant towards women. In recent years in Libya, twelve women democracy activists have been assassinated. In Somalia in 2015 alone, fifteen women were executed.

Women are often blamed for the violent physical attacks they endure—for the way they dress, the places they frequent, their mannerisms, or the fact that they are alone when attacked. Mainstream and social media platforms are powerful tools that fringe actors use to convey such views. The mainstream discourse that condones violence against women who have "dishonored" or transgressed limiting social norms translates into the domestic sphere, so that violence as a means of controlling sisters, wives, and daughters is tolerated, even where laws forbid it.

Extremist groups also use women as pawns in politics and propaganda. In Algeria, political party quotas for women were introduced as "window dressing" to gain favor with the middle class and the West. In many instances, participation in democratic processes, particularly elections, is used to legitimate regressive legislation and claim popular backing for it. The suspension of equal rights legislation and the introduction of discriminatory laws are both means and ends for such groups. The issues vary across regions, but the impetus to control women's bodies and legal personas is shared.

IV. Women's Movements at the Frontlines

Because the coercion and co-option of women is so integral to many extremist groups, women are often the first to see, hear, and experience the ascendancy of these groups. For the past three decades, women's movements around the globe have been raising alarm bells against the specter of extremism. They have also been fighting back and developing innovative solutions to preserve the space for equal rights, pluralism, and peace.

Across countries affected by extremism, women-led organizations are actively engaged in critical strategic areas. They are often involved in efforts to deradicalize and demobilize extremist youth; promote peace and pluralism by providing alternative community activities for youth and other members of the community to express their grievances and envisage a productive and constructive future; broaden the space for women's political participation and influence in national and international decision-making institutions; and lead efforts to highlight and address violence against women and girls.

V. The Challenges Women Face

Despite the ambitious work they take on in many spheres, women's movements face immense challenges. Not only do they encounter direct threats to their own lives and families, they are often persecuted by states and nonstate actors for daring to raise uncomfortable truths about injustice and corruption and for articulating alternative visions for their societies.

The emergence of the P/CVE agenda is creating new difficulties. Many states, including those allied with the United States, are using the threat of extremism to shut down moderate dissenting voices and spaces. Instead of protecting and nurturing spaces for dialogue, governments increasingly are repressing civil society. Women are caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place. Women leaders committed to peace and social justice are typically most active in civil society. Yet they are under pressure to conform to state policies or fall silent for fear of retribution from extremist groups. Many governments seek to instrumentalize women, especially as mothers. But governments have less appetite for listening to the solutions that women's organizations have developed or their critique of state policies that contribute to rising extremism.

Additionally, rhetorical support of policy documents and plans in support of women, peace, and security is rarely matched by support in funding and political leverage. As a result, women's organizations continue to be absent from decision-making and remain resource constrained.

Governments that want women involved in countering violent extremism must recognize that women's organizations have consciously and very strategically engaged in the P/CVE arena for decades, long before they gained international attention. Instead of silencing and marginalizing women, states should recognize the value they bring to efforts to solve peace and security challenges.

To support women's efforts to combat extremism at local, national, and global levels, the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) launched the Global Solutions Exchange (GSX) in September 2016. The GSX will provide civil society organizations and governments the opportunity to come together and exchange best practices and lessons learned in addressing extremism and promoting alternatives.

VI. Recommendations

As the new U.S. government develops policies and programs to deal with the threat of violent extremism, we offer recommendations for strengthening the conceptual, political, programmatic, and budgetary efforts to combat violent extremism.

First, Conceptual:
- Recognize that extremism is in large part fueled and supported by grievances that can be attributed to the failure of states to prevent corruption and to ensure development, economic prosperity, and democratization. Make democratization, transparency, accountability, good governance, and gender equality prerequisites for cooperation with states that are partnering to combat extremism and seek the input of women-led organizations.

- Integrate gendered analysis into U.S. government research and documentation related to efforts to prevent and counter extremism.

Second, Political:
- Ensure that states, particularly U.S. allies, do not undermine international guarantees for women's rights and women peace and human rights defenders. Publicly and privately press governments—especially those receiving security and development assistance—to live up to their international obligations and to avoid sacrificing human rights in the name of security.

- Support and participate in the new Global Solution Exchange (GSX) to hear directly from women-led organizations and heed their advice regarding the impact of CVE policies and programs;

Third, Programmatic:
- Ensure women's organizations are involved in the design phase of any programming, and recognize and credit their expertise, knowledge, and commitment. Support the scaling up (or scaling across) of projects implemented at the local level by women's organizations whose programmatic interventions and innovations are deemed to be models of good practice.

- Ensure that protection of civilians, community policing, and understanding of the differential experiences and security needs of men and women are central to all training provided to security and law enforcement forces, especially where the United States is providing such assistance to allies.

- Monitor and evaluate US security assistance by seeking the input of women-led organizations active in affected countries and communities.

Fourth, Budgetary:
- Ensure multiyear funding for programs focused on the intersection of the P/CVE and WPS agendas, recognizing that problems of this magnitude cannot be resolved in the short term.

- Ensure timely funding is available to grassroots and national organizations working on deradicalization, promoting alternatives, ensuring women's political and social participation, and addressing and preventing violence against women.

Members of the U.S. Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace, and Security stand ready to advise the new U.S. government on gendered policies and programs preventing and countering violent extremism. The members of the working group have years of experience and expertise and believe that the United States can have a leading impact on global peace and security.

About the Authors

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This Policybrief draws on: Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini, "Listen to the Women Activists," in *Charting a New Course: Thought for Action Kit: Women Preventing Violent Extremism,* (United States Institute of Peace, 2015); Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini and Madeline Koch, "Extremism in the Mainstream: Implications for and Actions by Women" (UN Women, 2015). http://www.icanpeacework.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Extremism-in-the-Mainstream-UNW.pdf; Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini, "Uncomfortable Truths, Unconventional Wisdoms: Women's Perspectives on Violent Extremism & Security Interventions," *WASL Briefs on Policy and Practice*, No.1, March 2016. http://www.waslglobal.net/publications-archive/2016/3/22/

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Established in 2010, The U.S. Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace, and Security (U.S. CSWG) is a network of civil society organizations with years of experience working on issues involving women, war, and peace. The U.S. CSWG informs, promotes, facilitates, and monitors the meaningful implementation of the U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security.